

Getting a fix on Indianapolis Colts owner Bob Irsay's background isn't easy, but this is certain—he has turned one of the NFL's best franchises into a laughingstock

by E.M. SWIFT

Two days before Thanksgiving, in the bar of Chicago's prestigious Tavern Club, 63-year-old Robert Irsay is fighting yet another battle with the truth. "I've been a winner all my life," he says firmly, fueled by half a dozen screwdrivers during the 2½-hour lunchless luncheon. His white hair is neatly groomed, his face a little flushed, his eyes lightly glazed. "When a man takes one dollar and turns it into \$50 million, he's a winner. I'd like to turn the Colts into a Super Bowl winner in my lifetime. That's what I have left. To win a ring."

To come full circle. To undo what he has done, for under Irsay the Colts have done little else but lose: 1-13 this year after upsetting Atlanta 28-23 Sunday, 10-36 since moving to Indianapolis, 78-140-1 since Irsay took over the team in 1972, with 12 losing seasons in 15 years. This from a franchise that, in the 15 years prior to Irsay, had no losing sea-

sons and won three NFL championships, with an overall 138-59-5 record. One of the great dynasties in professional sports, dismantled by one man. Destroyed, not by luck or circumstance, but by what numerous people cite as incompetence. He would like to change all that. To build a new dynasty. "The big thing I'm learning in the NFL is you have to have patience and get the right personnel in the right place at the right time," he says.

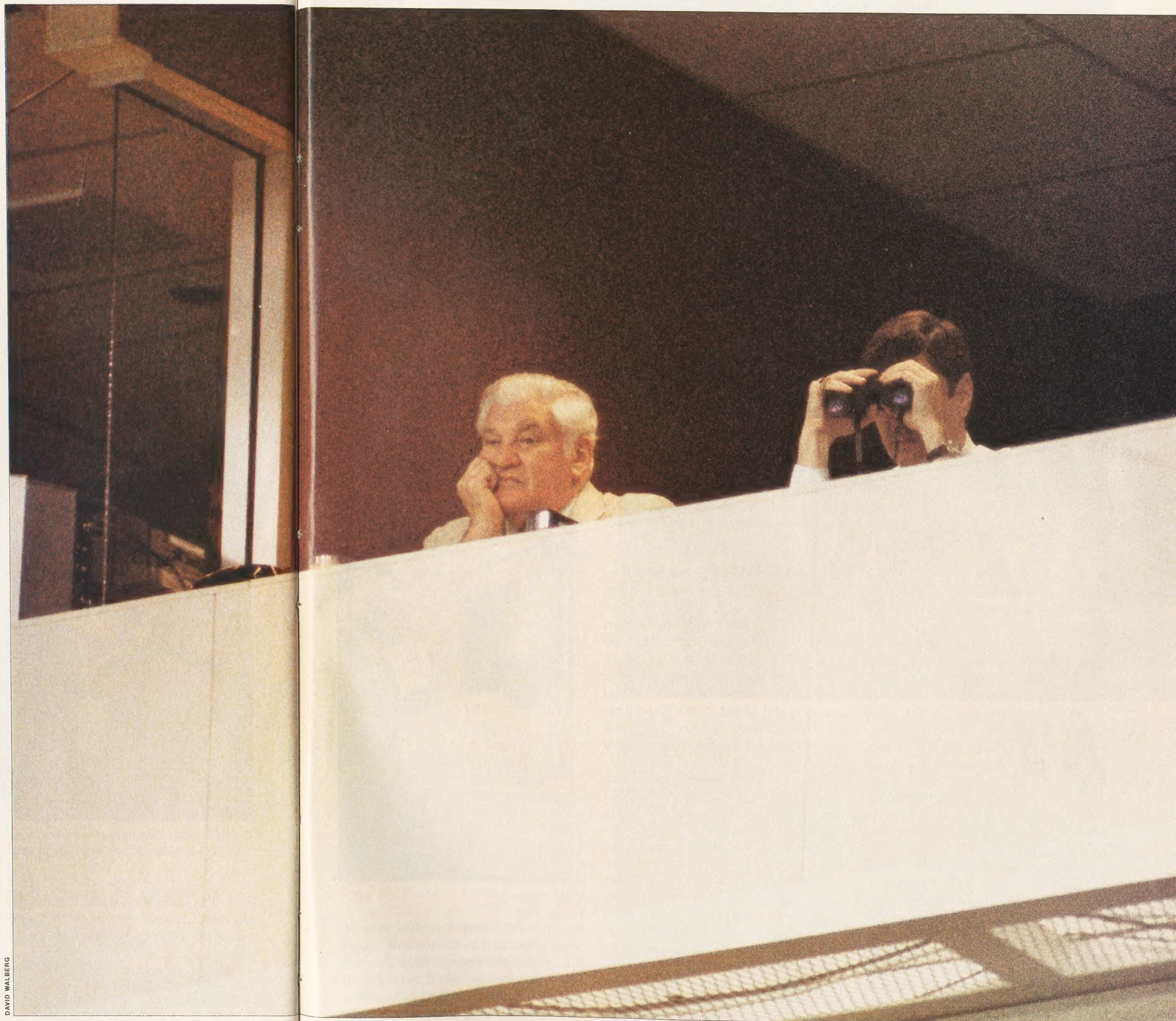
Fifteen years to learn all that. And the sad thing is, here we go again.

Here we go again. That was the murmuring heard around the NFL last week when Irsay's Colts announced that head coach Rod Dowhower had been fired and replaced by Ron Meyer, of all people, who becomes the third coach in Indianapolis's three-year history--and Irsay's ninth. "The reaction in the league is, 'My god,'" said one NFL general manager, "reflecting on the fact that Meyer was a controversial figure as coach both of SMU, where he took the football pro-

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**NOW YOU
SEE HIM,
NOW YOU
DON'T**

DAVID WALBERG





That overnight quarterback sneak out of Baltimore made Indy mayor Hudnut happy.

I R S A Y

gram down a path that led to NCAA probation, and of the New England Patriots, where in 2½ seasons he alienated his players and management to an extent seldom seen in pro football. After he was fired, Meyer was called "the sorriest excuse for a football coach I've ever seen" by All-Pro guard John Hannah.

"Meyer was No. 1 on our list," says Colts G.M. Jim Irsay, Robert's 27-year-old son. "He's a winner and a motivator. The New England thing was great experience for him."

Sure it was. Just as the Baltimore thing was great experience for Robert Irsay. So here we go again, Indianapolis. Sit tight for a wonderful ride.

Baltimore Mayor William Donald Schaefer, who was recently elected governor of Maryland, once described Irsay as "one of the most interesting men I've ever met." That is a fine example of euphemism. Schaefer had publicly been Irsay's defender until late on the night of March 28, 1984, when he heard the news over the radio that the Colts were packing up to leave. His spokesperson, Pat Bernstein, was recently asked if Schaefer

had gotten over the manner in which Irsay had spirited the club out of town in the dead of night without the courtesy of a phone call. "I don't think you ever get over betrayal like that," she said. "The presumption was always that the mayor was dealing with somebody who had some scruples. But when [Irsay] told you one thing and turned around and did exactly the opposite, you got the feeling that you weren't dealing with an equal partner."

Irsay is a man whom an astonishing number of former associates do not like to remember, but one they cannot forget. Dowhower did not wish to be interviewed about Irsay, although his lawyer, Robert Goldy, responded to a quote attributed to Irsay asserting that Dowhower had "violated his contract" because he had not called Irsay "every Monday and Friday" during the season. "There is nothing in his contract about calling Bob Irsay on Mondays or Fridays," Goldy said. "I know of no basis for that other than Bob Irsay's statements."

Dowhower has a year left on his contract, but Irsay said he will not pay him



STEVE OBERREICH

because of the alleged breach. "I've already talked to the commissioner," Irsay said. Goldy responded: "Mike Chernoff [the Colts general counsel] and Bob Irsay told me . . . they would like the separation to be on a fair, dignified and gentlemanly basis. Their definition of those

words is a puzzle to me. Maybe we don't read the same dictionary."

All of this would not surprise Howard Schnellenberger, the third coach fired during the Irsay era. He chooses not to discuss his old boss for the record, although in February 1984, shortly after his Miami Hurricanes won the national title, Schnellenberger told *The Indianapolis Star*: "The people of Indianapolis will rue the day they ever made [Irsay] an offer to move his team to their city."

Bert Jones, the man who quarterbacked the Colts to their three winning seasons under Irsay, will only paraphrase a quote he originally gave to *The Sun* in Baltimore when asked about Irsay: "He lied and he cheated and he was rude and he was crude and he was Bob Irsay." Then Jones added, "He doesn't have any morals. It's a sad state for the NFL to be associated with him, but beyond that I've removed him from my mind."

Mike McCormack, who coached the Colts in the 1980 and '81 seasons, says, "Those were the two most unpleasant years of my life and I really don't care to comment further on it."

Irsay's mother, Elaine, is 84 years old and in failing health. Reached by phone at her home in Rolling Meadows, Ill., Mrs. Irsay, who still has a rich Hungarian accent, said, "He's a devil on earth, that one." Every few seconds she paused for breath, her voice rising at the start of each thought, then quickly tiring. "He stole all our money and said goodbye. He don't care for me. I don't even see him for 35 years. My husband, Charles, sent him to college. I made his wedding. Five thousand dollars, it cost us. When my husband got sick and got the heart attack, he [Bob] took advantage. He was no good," she said. "He was a bad boy. I don't want to talk about him."

It was Carroll Rosenbloom and Joe Thomas, both now deceased, who brought Irsay into the league. Rosenbloom was the owner of the Colts from 1953 to 1972, but he wanted out of Baltimore for a couple of the reasons that Irsay ultimately did—money and a running feud with the Baltimore press. Thomas had recently been fired as the personnel director of the Dolphins. Together, they cooked up a deal that would get Rosenbloom out of Baltimore and

into the lucrative L.A. market and provide Thomas with a job as G.M. of the Colts. They needed to find someone to buy the Rams for \$19 million—on the condition that the individual would then trade the Rams, even up, for Rosenbloom's Colts. That someone, an acquaintance of Thomas's from Florida, was a Chicago heating and air-conditioning contractor named Robert Irsay.

Initially, Irsay was a breath of fresh air in Baltimore, something of an engaging country bumpkin following the sophisticated and egotistical Rosenbloom. He had the curious habit of calling everyone

"Tiger," and he was quick with a warm, firm handshake. Tom Matte, the popular halfback who was nearing the end of his career, recalls the first time he met the new owner: "It was in Denver, where we had broken training camp. A team meeting was called so we could meet Mr. Irsay, and he comes in an hour late, sloshed, looks down at his shoes and starts rambling: 'I'm the new owner, and I was in the Marines. I'm married to a nice Polack. . . .' I looked over at [Johnny] Unitas and we both started laughing. How could this guy have made \$19 million if he can't even look you in the face?"

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Matte knew the good days in Baltimore; the glory has faded fast in the Hoosier Dome.

Irsay had, indeed, made a lot of money, although his origins were not quite as humble as he liked to pass them off as being. In the Colts media guides and in a number of early interviews, Irsay made much of being raised in the “Bucktown” section of Chicago, the Near Northwest



Side, an ethnically diverse area with a large East European population. “Hunkies” was a slang racial catchall for the residents, and Irsay himself was of Hungarian blood. “My father died when I was very young, and we were poor,” he told *The Sun* in a 1973 interview, going on to describe to the Baltimore paper how he could run the 100 in 9.8 but never reached his potential as a football player because he was carrying “23 semester hours, washing dishes to help support myself, working in a haberdashery on Saturdays, and I had to find enough time to study.” He liked to brag that he got his start on \$800 borrowed from his wife.

In the media guide he claimed, and still claims, to have graduated from the University of Illinois (where he supposedly was an Illini football teammate of former Colt Alex Agase) with a degree in mechanical engineering. Of his war record Irsay told *The Sun*, “I was wounded once pretty badly in the leg, in New Guinea, hit by a grenade” and in 1975 he told the Chicago *Sun-Times* that he “came out as first lieutenant.”

He spoke of the tragic death of his only daughter, Roberta, who in 1971 at age 14 suffered fatal injuries in an auto accident on Interstate 294 outside Chicago. He told *The Sun*: “They caught the kids who ran her car off the road. They were on drugs when it happened. They got 10 to 20 years, but the way things are today they’ll probably be out in five.”

It was an astounding collection of half-truths and prevarications. His daughter had, indeed, been killed in an accident, but according to state police records, there was no evidence of another car having run her vehicle off the road, no arrests were made, and the car in which Roberta was a passenger had, in fact, gone over a guardrail, slid down an embankment and struck a car on another expressway.

Irsay’s father, Charles, was very much alive in 1973—he died in February 1984—although he had not spoken to Bob since the son walked out of his office in 1951 to start a competing sheet metal firm—the Robert Irsay Company. “He wasn’t my father,” Robert asserts. “He was my stepfather. I never saw him again. We just dropped it. They never

called me and I never called them. I didn’t get a nickel from him. I just went out on my own and did it.”

When informed that both his mother and his brother say that Charles Irsay was his father, Irsay reddens and a bead of sweat appears on his brow. “My father, my stepfather, whatever you want to call him. The truth is, I don’t know what was right. I was raised by my grandfather, Alex Nyitroy. I made it the hard way, that’s the important thing. I had a very minimal family life.”

“We weren’t poor by any stretch of the imagination,” says Ronald Irsay, Bob’s brother, who, at 55, is eight years his junior. “Why would my grandfather raise him and my mom and dad raise me? We lived in a very nice home in West Rogers Park. We weren’t wealthy, but my dad owned several buildings in Chicago and at one time was one of the largest tin knockers [sheet metal contractors] in the city. I don’t know how else to say this, but my brother tried to run my father out of business. Bob actually worked to try to destroy his own father. Oh, he’s a real sweetheart, all right.”

The family name, according to Mrs. Irsay and Ron, was originally Israel, which was changed to Irsay in 1931, some eight years after Robert was born on March 5, 1923. (A check of birth records in Cook County from the 1920s uncovered neither a Robert Irsay nor a Robert Israel, an omission that was described as not unusual by county record keepers.) Both parents had emigrated to this country from Hungary. Both were Jewish, and they raised their children as Jews. Bob went to Lane Tech High School in Chicago and in the fall of 1940 enrolled at the University of Illinois.

Art Petacque, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for the Chicago *Sun-Times*, happened to be Irsay’s roommate that year. As freshmen both joined Sigma Alpha Mu, a Jewish fraternity often referred to as Sammy House. “His father used to lecture him on the value of money,” Petacque recalls. “He had a European accent, and I remember him telling Bob, ‘Remember, son, money doesn’t grow on bushes.’ But Bob was not poverty-stricken by any means.”

Harold Fry, a past president of the Illini Sammy House, recalls that Bob “never fit in with the fraternity. He played nothing in the way of sports.” (The Illini athletic department confirms this.)

Yet when you ask Irsay about the fra-

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Earlier in his “confusing” life, Irsay had stormy relationships with his mother and father and with his younger brother, Ron.

ternity today, he denies having been a member, denies having been a pledge, denies even remembering Art Petacque. "I never belonged to a fraternity," he says. "I had free room and board there because I worked washing dishes and waiting on tables. You had to have money to belong to a fraternity."

"He joined the house as a pledge, which is the first step toward becoming a member," Petacque says. "He definitely was a pledge, and not an employee of the club. They didn't paddle employees, and he got paddled plenty."

Irsay even denies being raised as a Jew. "If I'm Jewish, how come I belong to all the gentile clubs?" he asks, referring to various golf and social clubs he belongs to in the Chicago area and in Florida. "I'm a Catholic. I was married by Father Dolan in the Queen of All Saints Church in Chicago," he continues. "You can look it up."

"You converted?"
"No."

He is asked about the wedding that his mother gave him, the \$5,000 affair that was performed in Rabbi Louis Binstock's

study on July 12, 1947, at Temple Shalom, when Bob married the former Harriet Pogorzelski. And afterward the posh reception at the Belmont Hotel. "That's correct, also," Irsay says, barely missing a beat. "I had two weddings. That was for him," he adds, talking about his father, or stepfather, as Irsay refers to him. "Maybe my mother converted to Jewish, I don't know. I've had more problems finding out who I am and what I am. Everything's so confusing in my life."

Nor did Irsay graduate, as his biography contends. According to an Illinois spokesman, he attended the school for the fall semester of 1940, the spring and fall semesters of 1941 and the summer session of 1942, leaving without a degree. He enlisted in the Marines on Oct. 23, 1942, and was discharged on April 3, 1943 as a sergeant—not a lieutenant—without having served overseas. No medals, no decorations. A Marine spokesman could provide no further details.

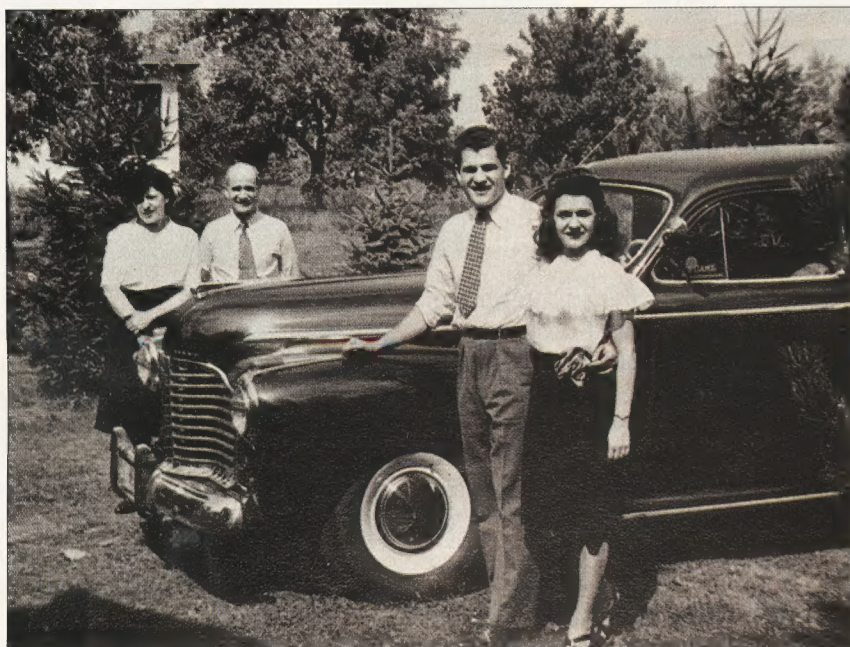
Irsay couldn't either. "I was in the Army and the Navy and the Marines," he said recently. "The Navy assigned me to the Seabees. I saw minor action. I don't want to talk about it."

In 1946, Irsay's father took him into the family business, the Acord Ventilating Company. He worked there as a salesman, eventually making bids on projects and assuming the title of secretary.

Irsay left his father's company on Dec. 31, 1951, amid all sorts of unsavory accusations by his mother and brother, receiving as part of his settlement a Caterpillar Tractor Company account that he had landed for Acord, a building used in connection with that account, two automobiles, a truck and a quantity of shop equipment that would enable him to go right into business without assuming a large debt. Irsay also lured away five of his father's employees, and he had his own numerous contacts, which, by written agreement, he was free to pursue.

Young, ambitious, blessed with a superb knack for salesmanship, Bob was off and running with the Robert Irsay Company. His father's company went into immediate decline, and his brother Ron had to quit college to try to help salvage it. Two and a half years later, Acord Ventilating was out of business.

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Before the split-up: Bob and Harriet were a striking couple years ago (his parents are in the background) and in more recent times.

"Bob never acknowledged us," recalls Ron. "The last time I had any meaningful contact with him was—I can tell you almost exactly—March or April of 1953. I was getting married in May, and he gave me 10 bucks when he saw me, saying something like 'I hear you're engaged.' I had to give it back to him. I told him he wasn't going to be invited to the wedding because I didn't want a family squabble. He said, 'Have it your way, kid. You've got to choose. You can come in with me, or stay with them. You can't have it both

a force to be reckoned with. Bob was a gambler and very innovative. He was the first guy to build a big new plant out in the suburbs. We were the first company to bid on jobs on the basis of rough outline specifications rather than finished plans, a practice that today is commonplace. He hired a lot of young superintendents and paid them over scale, and he had good rapport with his workers. This, as I say, was in the early years, the formative years, before he was rich. Before he realized that money gave him power."



On Johnny Unitas Day in 1977, Irsay celebrated with the legendary Colts quarterback.

ways.' I told him, 'No choice, Bob. See ya 'round.'"

Gene Bednarz, a vice-president of Linear Flow Systems, a subsidiary of the Robert Irsay Company (Robert no longer has any connection with it), was one of those who left Acord to follow Bob. "After Bob left his father, he began trying to hide his Jewishness," Bednarz says. "I don't know what prompted him to do that, unless it was out of spite for his father. I wasn't aware of any discrimination in our business. He's tough to figure out sometimes. I've seen him spend a thousand dollars entertaining a guy one night, then the next day turn down a \$5 raise to a guy making \$95 a week.

"Bob was a helluva guy in those years. He had great charisma. By 1960 we were

"He's a real dynamic guy," says a vice-president of the Robert Irsay Company who first joined the firm back in the mid-'60s, and who asked that his name not be used. "You hear a lot of stories about what a rat he is, but if you stay close to him, you'll probably come out a winner." The man remembers the time there was a Teamsters strike in the mid-'60s. "Bob came by our offices and asked around for volunteers to drive a truck to deliver some materials to a site," he says. "I told him, 'You're crazy, but I'll drive if you'll drive.' He said, 'I'll meet you here at seven in the morning.' Not only did he show up, but he gave me the suburban delivery, and he made the delivery to the site in the city of Chicago. It took a lot of guts to drive through a

Teamsters picket line in this city then.

"The construction business is basically a b.s.-er's business," he continues. "That was one of the problems Bob had with the press. He'd always exaggerate. If something cost a million dollars, to Bob it was a hundred million. You're not going to operate in this business as a priest. You have to be very creative. Like, sometimes word would get out that we had a certain job when in fact we hadn't even put a bid in on it. So Bob might capitalize on the situation by putting one of our trailers on the site. The competition would figure the contract was ours, so why waste time putting in a bid?"

Eventually, Irsay got a little too creative in his maneuverings, though he saved himself from prosecution by turning state's evidence in a 1978 bid-rigging case, *United States v. Climatemp, Inc.* Irsay, who was represented by former U.S. Attorney Samuel K. Skinner, was granted immunity from prosecution four days before the indictments were handed out in exchange for testimony that consisted of "mostly a bunch of 'I don't remember,' " according to defense attorney Robert Bailey. Irsay at first denied to SI that he had been granted immunity and then changed his story. "I was probably granted immunity," he said.

The government had charged that certain members of the now defunct Ventilating and Air Conditioning Contractors Association, between 1963 and 1976, routinely met and allocated at least 80 heating and air-conditioning projects among themselves, adding between 5% and 8% on top of the designated bid in order to eventually pay kickbacks to friendly politicians, none of whom was charged. Irsay was a vice-president of the association and a member of the executive board until 1972, at which point, according to court documents, he withdrew from the bid-rigging arrangement, having sold his business to Zurn Industries.

By 1970 the Robert Irsay Company was the largest sheet metal business in Chicago, grossing nearly \$13 million in sales and posting after-tax profits of about \$650,000. In 1971 Irsay sold the company to Zurn in exchange for some \$8.5 million in common stock, although he recently claimed that he had sold to Zurn for "\$50 million." Irsay stayed on with the company until 1978 when, according to a Zurn spokesman, Irsay resigned after "it was suggested the Colts were distracting him."

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Ah, yes. The Colts. If the Colts were distracting Irsay, he was repaying them with a regular dose of chaos, particularly after he fired Joe Thomas in 1977. To be fair, though, Thomas was responsible for getting Irsay off on the wrong foot.

Under Rosenbloom, the Colts had been like a family. "There were no individualists," recalls Matte. "Carroll wouldn't allow it." It was part of the Colts' secret of success. Veterans like Matte, Unitas, John Mackey and Raymond Berry actually had a say in who was cut and who wasn't. The coaching staff would listen to them. Curfews weren't enforced by the coaches; they were enforced by the team leaders. And Friday nights were team nights, when the players would go out and, instead of watching film, would do no more than drink beer and joke and develop that special bonding that a lot of the great teams have. "Everybody lived here in town and made appearances for free. We were part of the community," recalls Matte. "That was the tradition. It made us a team."

Thomas didn't understand this. Or, if he did, he ignored it. He wanted his own team, his own legacy. "Joe's ego was the biggest thing that ever was," says Mike Curtis, the Colts All-Pro linebacker in the late 1960s and early '70s.

By the 1973 season Thomas had swung 13 deals, trading away such aging—but beloved—stars as Unitas and Matte. He fired coach Don McCafferty, who had won the 1971 Super Bowl, five games into the 1972 season. The Colts' era was over. Everyone who had stayed on from the Rosenbloom regime knew it.

"Joe Thomas was a very strong man, and he ran that football business," Irsay says. "His one failure was that he got the city of Baltimore mad at him, and I was caught in the middle of it. He was the type of guy who tried to deal real rugged. It was always 'You're fired' or 'You're done.' He had no consideration for anyone else. But I learned a lot from his teachings about football, some good and some bad."

Irsay's first great public explosion came in the third game of the 1974 season, in Philadelphia. Marty Domres was the Colts quarterback, a player Irsay had once humiliated in front of his teammates by shouting, "Nice game, Marty, too bad most of the passes you completed were to the wrong team." In the third quarter, Irsay, prowling the sideline, tugged on Schnellenberger's arm and suggested he replace Domres with Bert

Jones. Schnellenberger declined, adding—and here history becomes a little fuzzy—either that Irsay should mind his own business or that Irsay should attempt an anatomical impossibility while minding his own business. Whatever, Irsay took offense. "He just wanted to be part of the team, be the type of owner who would have a beer with the guys and maybe arm wrestle after the game," recalls Curtis. "He really wanted us to like him. That's why he was down on the field to begin with. And Howard was no diplomat. It was just bad luck."

Irsay, apparently inebriated, according to several team sources, stormed into the dressing room after the game—the team's third straight defeat—and announced to the players that Schnellenberger was fired and that Thomas would be their new coach. The team almost lynched him. In the coach's office, Schnellenberger asked Ernie Accorsi, the Colts public relations director, what the ruckus was about. "I think he just fired you," Accorsi replied. Irsay charged in and confirmed it. Then he left in his limo. Thomas, meanwhile, couldn't get into the dressing room; he was held at bay by a security guard who was under orders not to open the room to the press. "There's a guy named Thomas demand-

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Baltimore was left with only the memories, among them a dramatic farewell by Unitas.



RON ROSS

ing to get in," the guard told Accorsi.

Thomas was right behind him. "What's going on in here?"

"Irsay just fired Howard."

"What?"

"That's not the worst news. He named you as head coach."

"What!"

"You're no head coach, for god's sake," Mike Curtis said.

"You shut up."

It was true, though. Thomas didn't even know the team's playbook. And for the rest of the season—the Colts ended at 2–12—Thomas would ask startling things like "Do we have a halfback option pass?" in third- or fourth-down situations. To which someone would answer, "Yes, Coach, we have three of them."

apologize. Curiously, Marchibroda held Thomas responsible for the tirade, and he told Irsay in a meeting aboard Irsay's yacht—named, humbly, *The Mighty I*—that either Thomas had to go, or he would. Irsay sided with Thomas. When the news of Marchibroda's resignation reached the players, there was such a furor that Irsay told Thomas to ask Marchibroda back. Marchibroda returned, the Colts won their division again, and after the season it was Thomas who was fired.

"When Thomas left, suddenly there's no buffer between the team and Irsay," recalls Bruce Laird, a safety who played 10 years with the Colts. "Suddenly everything has to go through the Irsay-Chernoff chain. From then on, money became almost nonexistent, and every-

capped since birth. Irsay neither phoned Harriet to tell her he was leaving nor wrote her an explanation—she said she learned from the family maid that he had moved out of their Winnetka, Ill., home. But, then, exits have never been Irsay's strong suit.

"Owning a football team really made him feel powerful," Harriet says now. "Between his power and his drinking, he just became obnoxious. He was always belittling the players and coaches, constantly in a fit of temper. He would burst into the locker room and yell and scream so that things were constantly in a state of turmoil. I used to tell him, 'Don't go down there, Bob. Wait till Monday.' Instead of going up to Bert Jones and saying, 'How are you feeling?' Bob would



STAN DENNY/SPORTSMAN



FOCUS ON SPORTS



Irsay has gone through quite a succession of coaches: from left, Schnellenberger; Thomas; Marchibroda; McCormack; Kush; Dowhower; and, as of Dec. 1, Meyer, the controversial former coach of the Patriots.

Ted Marchibroda took over as coach the next year, and the team, with Jones at quarterback, went from 2–12 to 10–4 and won the first of three straight division titles. These were the Irsay glory years, but they were nonetheless turbulent. Before the opening game of the 1976 season, for instance, Marchibroda resigned subsequent to an Irsayan locker-room tantrum after an exhibition game loss in Detroit. Irsay dressed down the team with such malice that 16-year-old Jimmy climbed on the team bus afterward to

thing they touched turned to manure."

Laird recalls coming in to lift weights and soak in the Jacuzzi at the Colts training facility in Owings Mills, Md. The Jacuzzi was turned off. Laird said to the team's trainer: "Let's get this thing going." Laird recalls the trainer shaking his head and telling him, "Upstairs says no. We're spending too much on electricity."

"After Thomas left, Bob started mismanaging the team," says Harriet Irsay, his wife of 39 years, who last year filed suit for divorce. As part of the settlement, she is seeking control of the team. Irsay left her on June 12, 1985, three days after her 64th birthday. She was in Florida at the time, visiting the couple's oldest son, Tom, who has been mentally handi-

say, "You're not going to make believe you're sick again?" That's the way he talks. He says mean things, but he only talks that way when he's been drinking."

In 1979, after a loss, Irsay interrupted a live radio interview with Jones, who was out with a shoulder injury, and said, "Hey, Bert, when are you going to start playing?" Irsay also told a reporter, "I am not paying Bert Jones \$275,000 to sit on his butt."

In 1978 Irsay became so incensed at the officiating in a game against Seattle that he tried to play the game under protest. Accorsi, who was by then the Colts assistant G.M., tried to explain that playing under protest was something they did in baseball, not football, but Irsay insist-

officials from the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum Commission, then to Jacksonville and Memphis. "He'd cock his head to one side, give us that teddy bear smile, and tell us he was being sincere with us," Jake Godbold, the mayor of Jacksonville, told *The Sun* in 1984. "His name is mud here."

John Malmo, a Memphis advertising executive, met with Irsay in the Chicago O'Hare Hilton to extend his city's proposal—an exceptionally generous one that guaranteed the Colts a reported \$65 million in ticket revenues for the first nine years. But not a unique one. Harold Deutsch was vice-president and G.M. of WCBM, the radio station that carried the Colts games in Baltimore. In 1983, Deutsch and Accorsi hammered out the details of a new contract that called for the station to pay the Colts \$1 million over three years. Irsay thought he could get another \$50,000 out of Deutsch, so he told Accorsi to ask him to come to a restaurant in Chicago so they could close the deal. "I had assumed it was going to be a private lunch, but there were about 16 people there, and they were drinking and it was noisy and so many rounds were ordered that I lost track of them," Deutsch recalls. "It was horrible. One by one people started to leave, and finally Bob and I were alone. 'Should we go over the contract now?' I asked. But he told me he wasn't going to talk business just then and invited me back to his club. Asked me to spend the night. I told him I really had to get back that evening. Then he said, 'Just a minute,' and excused himself. Ten or 15 minutes later he still hadn't returned, and after 25 minutes I became genuinely concerned for his health. So I called the captain over and suggested we might have a medical problem, and suggested he take a look in the men's room. There was a smile on his face. 'You're Mr. Deutsch, aren't you?'"

"Yes."

"Mr. Irsay had another appointment, but he'd be pleased if you would stay as long as you like as his guest. Can I bring you a drink?" I got my coat, grabbed

a cab, and flew back to Baltimore."

By 1980 the Maryland legislature was sufficiently concerned about losing the Colts that it passed a \$23 million bond issue for stadium renovation that was contingent on Irsay signing a 15-year lease. He refused on the grounds that Orioles owner Edward Bennett Williams was not being asked to sign a lease of similar duration, even though he, too, would benefit from the improvements. Before the start of the 1981 season, the Colts signed a two-year lease with Baltimore at ex-

couldn't stand McMahon's agent, Jerry Argovitz. Instead, Irsay wanted to take Ohio State's Art Schlichter, who, according to most scouting reports, did not have the arm to be an NFL passer.

The Colts were winless in the strike-shortened 1982 season, giving them a shot at quarterback John Elway. Elway, of course, made a public-relations error in announcing that he wouldn't play in Baltimore, when what he really meant was that he wouldn't play for Frank Kush, the Colts coach, and Irsay. Still,

Accorsi wanted him. Desperately. If another team wanted to draft him, it would have had to fork over three first-round draft picks in exchange. That was Accorsi's price. When no other team met it, the Colts drafted him. Elway said the Colts had wasted a draft choice. He would play baseball.

"I covered minor league baseball when I was a sports-writer," recalls Accorsi, now G.M. of the Browns. "Elway wasn't going to give up a chance at the Hall of Fame to play in Greensboro, North Carolina, which is exactly where he would have been sent. If we'd been patient we could have signed him."

Instead, Irsay traded him within a week, without consulting either Accorsi or Kush. Denver gave up its own No. 1 pick in 1983 (offensive lineman Chris Hinton), its first pick in the 1984 draft and quarterback Mark Herrmann. As part of the deal, Denver also agreed to schedule the Colts for preseason games in each of the next two years. "Denver preseason games are one of the richest games you can get," Irsay recently admitted. "\$450,000 to \$500,000 they paid us." That

gives you a pretty good idea of whether Irsay cared more about winning or turning a profit.

That same year, when it came time to try to sign the Colts' second-round draft pick, linebacker Vernon Maxwell, Irsay's crude behavior temporarily ended the negotiations. Maxwell and his agent, Bob Cohen, met Irsay and Chernoff in Los Angeles. Irsay was drinking and became abusive, at one point offending Cohen,

continued



Irsay's son Jim is supportive of his father in his role as the club's general manager.

tremely favorable terms, a lease that would be Baltimore's last.

Irsay's meddling in football matters, meanwhile, had extended to the college draft—the results of which have shown up in Indianapolis's record the past three years. In 1982 Irsay told the Colts front office not to draft Brigham Young quarterback Jim McMahon because he

who is Jewish, sufficiently that he and Maxwell got up and left. "All I said was 'I don't want to be Jewed to death,'" Irsay recalls. "He got up, and I apologized. Mr. Cohen made a big show of it, but I didn't mean anything. It's a natural expression. Colloquial."

It is impossible to chronicle how many times Irsay told people he was not going to move the Colts. No one really believed him when he said it. One of the last times was on the Friday before the 1984 Super Bowl, after word leaked out that Irsay had a meeting scheduled with the governor of Arizona, Bruce Babbitt. Irsay, who was in Las Vegas at the time, abrupt-

ly canceled the meeting with Babbitt and flew to Baltimore. There he held an impromptu press conference with Mayor Schaefer at the Baltimore-Washington International Airport, ostensibly to assure the Baltimore press that the rumored negotiations with Phoenix were false. Irsay was reported by the *Baltimore News-American* to have "smelled of alcohol" and showed "signs of drinking," and since the scene was captured on videotape there was plenty of supporting visual evidence. It was a stormy session in which Irsay repeatedly cursed reporters, rambled nonsensically and asked, "What are you all doing here? I don't know what in the hell this is all about. I have no intention of moving the god-damn team."

In the meantime, Baltimore, Phoenix and Indianapolis all were negotiating fu-

riously to get, or retain, the crumbling franchise. Irsay did not attend the league meetings in Hawaii on March 18, sending in his place his son Jim. The league, having been burned in its lawsuit against Al Davis and the Raiders, made it clear that it would not try to stop Irsay from moving the Colts. It asked only that the league be notified by April 1, so that it could start making up the 1984 schedule.

As it turned out, Baltimore probably ended up making Irsay the most generous offer of the three: a reported \$15 million loan at 6.5%, a guarantee of at least 43,000 tickets sold per game for six years, and the purchase of the team's Owings



RON HANSON

And that's the way it was, until the Colts finally won in Atlanta on Sunday, 28-23.

Mills training facility for \$4 million. The Maryland legislature overplayed its hand, however, when, on March 27, one of its chambers passed legislation that would have enabled the state to seize the Colts in an eminent-domain proceeding. Irsay read about it the morning of the 28th, and called Indianapolis Mayor William Hudnut with the news that the Colts were moving to Indy. "They not only threw down the gauntlet, but they put a gun to his head and cocked it and asked, 'Want to see if it's loaded?'" says Chernoff of the eminent-domain bill. "They forced him to make a decision that day. People talk all the time about how we moved under the cover of darkness, but tell me, who was laying in the weeds?"

And presto-chango, Bob Irsay has a new start. A new lease that runs until 2004 with two five-year options for re-

newal. A new city that guaranteed him \$7 million in ticket and preseason radio and TV revenues for each of the first 12 years, plus the first \$500,000 of revenue from the luxury boxes. On top of that, the city has built the Colts a new \$4.4 million practice facility, which it has sold to Irsay for one dollar. He has new fans who are good-natured and, thus far, undemanding, preferring to be on the bottom of the barrel looking up rather than on the outside looking in. Even that miserable 1-13 has an upside—in the person of Vinny Testaverde. Rumors to the contrary—that the Rams would give up rookie quarterback Jim Everett, running back Barry Redden and their first pick in the '87 draft for the rights to Testaverde—Irsay says, "I will give you my word right here, we will take that first pick. I've already had seven calls, and they won't get it. No, no, no."

Irsay's supporters are quick to point out that he has opened the Colts' bulging coffers this season to sign such talented free agents as Dexter Clinkscale and All-Pro Dwight Hicks. And the salaries of the coaches, Irsay will tell you, have increased some \$650,000 in the past year—and this is before Ron Meyer was hired. Mind you, the Indianapolis payroll is still among the bottom five of the league. But no longer are the Colts 28th of 28, as they were in their final years in Baltimore, where, annually, such stars as Laird, John Dutton, Bert Jones, Lydell Mitchell and Curtis Dickey were cut, traded or disgruntled because of salary disputes.

Of course, Irsay can afford to be generous. He admits that the Colts were the "second or third" most profitable team in football in 1984 and 1985, running "close to \$10 million" in the black—other estimates have put the profit margin for those two years at \$20 million—and even with the horrendous showing of the 1986 team, the Colts will only drop back in the pack to no worse than eighth most profitable.

"Maybe some of the things he got burned on in Baltimore, he learned from," says Indianapolis Mayor Hudnut, a Presbyterian minister who apparently believes in miracles. "He's trying to be a good citizen here, and he's off to a good start."

"I'm a fighter," Irsay says. "I'll never quit until I win, and I'm going to fight as long as I live."

Oh, yes, we believe that all right. But just what is it that he's fighting? **END**